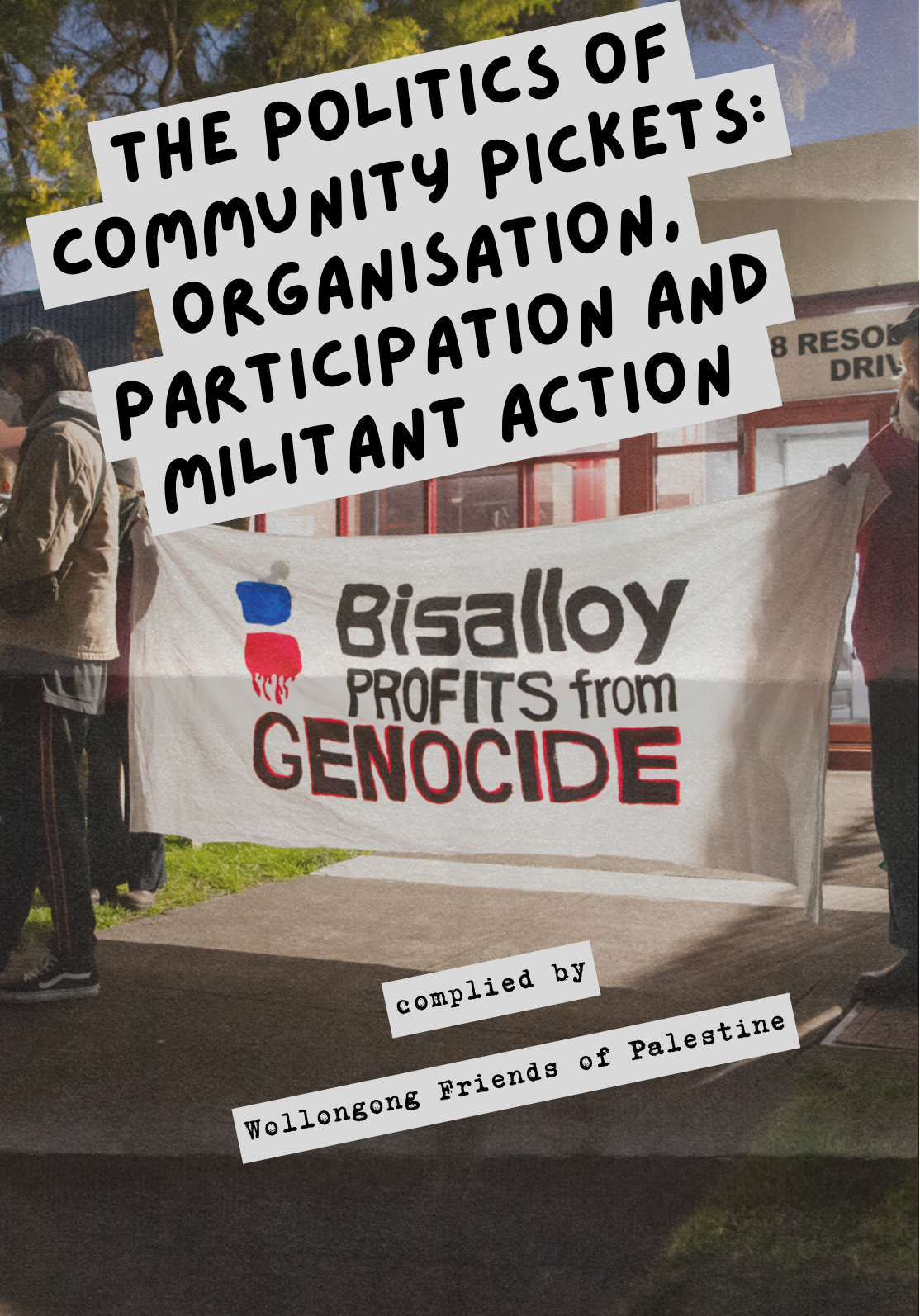
THE POLITICS OF COMMUNITY PICKETS: ORGANISATION, PARTICIPATION AND MILITANT ACTION



complied by

Wollongong Friends of Palestine

Acknowledgement of Country

This document was produced on unceded Dharawal and Yuin Country. Wollongong Friends of Palestine acknowledges that the first condition of emancipatory struggles in so-called australia is Aboriginal self-determination and that the struggle for a free Palestine is inextricably bound to decolonisation and land back. Always was always will be Aboriginal land.

INTRO

This zine has been produced by Wollongong Friends of Palestine. It aims to explain what community pickets are, how they have been used in the campaign against Bisalloy Steels, and to give recent historical examples of the use of community pickets in the Illawarra.

WHAT ARE COMMUNITY PICKETS?

Community pickets are a collective form of direct action where people come together to disrupt, shut down, or otherwise influence work operations at a given site.

Community pickets can occur to support workers in an industrial campaign where legal restrictions limit the actions of trade unions. In this case, community pickets are often endorsed by a trade union and are a tactic used to further a union campaign. But other types of community pickets are organised and run by the community, or in other words those participating in the picket themselves. In each instance, questions of organisation, decision making, participation, democracy, strategy and tactics are important.

When taking action in community pickets, it is important to be clear about what the objectives of the picket are. Often the objectives of a community picket will be to disrupt or halt the operations of the company being picketed. This can involve a variety of tactics and actions. Commonly, the gates and entrances to the site will be blocked by people standing in front of them.

Sometimes, in addition to people physically blocking the entrances themselves, other objects may be used to take up space and block movement through the gates.

It is important to think about how we might need to resist the police or others trying to break the picket lines, and how we can support each other to defy the police and intimidation. Taking collective action, supporting each other to resist state intimidation, and being open to discuss, debate and work together to effectively hold the picket line is a key part of building a strong movement that can win its objectives and resist the police and intimidation.

Given that the objective of a community picket is to disrupt and shut down the operations of the company, it is useful to think about how to do this and what this can mean in practice. In most instances, no goods are allowed to move in or out of the site. In other cases, some things might be allowed to leave, such as workers who are finishing the shift, but materials are not allowed to leave the site. Often, nothing is allowed to enter the site. Being clear in our objectives to stop the operations of the company being picketed helps the action to be as effective as it can be.

It is always important to try and make community pickets as participatory and democratic as possible, so that those who are participating are able to make decisions about the actions they are taking. These principles of democratic and participatory decision making should start at the very beginning of the planning process. Decisions about the nature of the picket, its planning and tactics, are best when they are just as participatory, transparent and democratic and decisions made on the picket lines.

Continuing to build community pickets and blockades as a form of mass militancy does not mean that everybody must be doing the same thing, must have the same approach to engagement with police, or want to do the same actions on the picket. There will always be a range of ideas, viewpoints, experiences, and things that people are 'up for' in a picket or blockade.

Similarly, mass militancy doesn't mean that one form of action is more important than another. For mass militancy to be successful, it will need to be based on a variety of activities and contributions. The organisational question is primarily one of how to be as disruptive as possible, to have as many people participate as possible in ways they see fit, for organisation before, during and after to be as democratic and participatory as possible, and for debates, discussions and disagreements about tactics and strategy to be had honestly and openly within the movement.

What can a community picket achieve?

While for many people the main aim of the picket is to disrupt the production of materials for as long as possible, the picket has a range of impacts that can help to achieve the goal of ending Bisalloy's contracts with Israel. When brainstorming ideas about what the pickets can achieve people have suggested the following outcomes:

- Build more public awareness about the company's role through media, social media and physical presence in the community
- Leverage this public exposure to pressure the company to cancel its contracts, reduce social credibility of company, impact share prices
- Regularly physically stopping work may cause loss in profits and reduction of material produced
- Build skills and confidence within the community to take action and build a culture of resistance, to keep strengthening the movement for a Free Palestine
- Create space to amplify the voices of Palestinans
- Empower workers to take their own action, possibly through unions

PICKETING BISALLOY STEELS

Bisalloy Steels, based in Unanderra in the Illawarra, manufactures armour grade steel that the Israeli occupation forces use on military and paramilitary vehicles. Due to the direct complicity with the genocide in Palestine, Bisalloy has been the site of multiple actions and pickets as part of the global Palestine solidarity movement.

The pickets of Bisalloy have been community pickets organised by the Illawarra community, not by trade unions. While the trade unions that have coverage at Bisalloy have been consulted, as has the South Coast Labour Council, the pickets have been organised and run by those taking part in them.

The Bisalloy pickets are their own democratic political space. We share a common goal to blockade Bisalloy, but there are many ways to do this, and different tactics are a strength. Everyone is an active participant and decisions will be made by those present. Different groups may take on specific roles, such as communications, music, legal observing, post-picket support. Groups can come together to make decisions like what gate to target, different ways to create disruption, roles needed, when to move on, etc. Affinity groups can also act independently to take action while being respectful of others tactics and safety. The picket is a living political space, which we hope generates many more militant direct actions in solidarity with Palestinian struggles and to shut down military industries across so-called ~~australia~~ and the world.

As a form of direct action, the Bisalloy pickets have played an important role in a sustained campaign against the company. Nic Beuret has argued that "Direct action isn't a stunt, but sustained disruption. It works not (primarily) because of its impact on public opinion, but because the disruption causes the mine, logging, roadbuilding or construction project to stop." This framing can help us to think about the needs of the Palestine solidarity movement, and the role of community pickets at Bisalloy and elsewhere, in the movement for a free Palestine.

The purpose of the Bisalloy pickets, like many other community pickets, has been to take direct action to disrupt and stop work operations at the site. The pickets aim to prevent goods from entering or leaving the site, and to prevent labour from entering the site. Hundreds of people have participated in the pickets of Bisalloy, successfully disrupting or completely shutting down operations on each occasion. This has involved people blocking the gates in picket lines. But there have also been a range of other activities involved. Pram Jams that create a space for children to participate in the picket have been really important. Food Not Bombs have played an important role by providing meals and snacks. Arts, crafts and music have made the pickets more fun and lively. We aim for mass militancy, democratic decision making on the picket lines, as well as creating space for a diversity of tactics: a practice of mass action with an internal articulation of autonomy.

PLANNING THE PICKETS

The Bisalloy pickets have been organised through publicly called, open organising meetings held after the weekly rallies for Palestine in Wollongong. Meetings have been attended by a range of community members who make decisions through discussion and, where possible, consensus. Meetings often include discussion and debate over tactics at the picket, ways to discuss the picket, images used to promote the picket, and so on. In general, we try to be guided by our aims for mass militancy and upholding a diversity of tactics; these aims often provide a way forward where members disagree with each other. We try to consider how multiple visions for the picket can be realised at once.

Beyond these meetings, pickets are planned through working groups that cover logistics, media, communications, training, and so on. Working groups are convened as needed.

The pickets at Bisalloy are part of a longer history of the use of this tactic and strategy in the Illawarra.

ROLES AT THE PICKET

The pickets have included a variety of roles, these have developed and changed over time depending the circumstances, politics and goals of people taking part. These roles have been developed through building on traditions of protest movements and are always evolving. By having different people take on different roles and aspects of organising, skills can be shared, ideas developed and reflected on after each picket.

Legal Observers: The role of LO is usually to document the actions of the police, through video recording and note taking. They may also provide support if people are arrested. Often LO have trained or researched relevant legal information and may be able to help provide some of this information.

Police liaison: This person or people talk to the police as a way to relay information between the police and the broader group. As the pickets are democratic spaces, this person is not making decisions on behalf of the group. There are times when the broader group may want this person to negotiate something with the police on behalf of the group. Other times the group may want the Police Liaison to simply relay information. This person can also tactically delay or slow down police decision-making.

Medics: People trained in First Aid are onsite as medics to help with any injury or illness that occurs. They can be identified by (?)

Worker liaison: some pickets may include this role, often so that there is someone who can approach workers who might be trying to get into the site, and let them know what is happening, or to de-escalate things if there is tension rising.

Media team: at each picket a team will be helping to get media and social media coverage of the actions. They might be walking around taking photos, videos and sometimes livestreams of the protest. They might ask people to hold a banner up or be prepared for the photo to be taken, or if people don't want to be in a photo. They might ask people if anyone wants to make a comment for the social media. They will usually liaise with mainstream journalists as well, and the spokesperson will do interviews. Usually the media team will let people know, via the signal chat, if mainstream media are on site. Mainstream journalists might take photos and videos without letting people know, so its good to be aware of this. They also have approached various people asking for comment about the picket. People make their own decision about whether to talk to the media or not. You can always direct them the media team and the spokesperson if you don't want to talk with them

Communications people: something that has happened at previous pickets is that a designated communications person at each gate or section of the picket, has been responsible for sharing information between the different locations, such as posting into the signal chat to let people know if police have arrived, if a particular gate needs more people, or decisions made about what people are going to do next. The information shared by the communications person has been based on what people at the picket want to communicated to other sections of the protest.

Food Not Bombs: provides tasty food, snacks and drinks.

AFFINITY GROUPS

Many people choose to come to the picket in an affinity group. This is a group of people who may be friends or share ideas of political and tactical aspects of how they want to engage at the picket. When a mass protest is made up of affinity groups, it can help the protest be dynamic, make decisions quickly and have smaller groups who are ready to take on different parts of the action. Coming in an affinity group means you have some trusted people who can support you throughout and sometimes after the action. It means that you can make decisions together for example about what kind of tactic you will use to block an entrance. In preparation for the picket, people forming an affinity group might get together and discuss some of the following questions:

- Are there any specific roles people would be interested in?
- How will you communicate amongst each other? Who in your group will be a communication person with the rest of the picket if needed?
- Are you willing to risk being arrested? In what situations would you be willing to take this risk?
- If you are arrested, what sort of support do you need? Do you have someone who needs to be contacted? Do you have any medication that you need the police to be aware of?
- If someone in your group is arrested, what kind of ongoing support is the group able to provide, such as going along to court?
- Is anyone in your group at higher risk if arrested? How will you group respond if that person is getting arrested?

- Where at the picket would your group prefer to be positioned? Such as right up at the gates or away from this area?
- Does anyone have any injuries or medical conditions that may be relevant for your group to know?
- How do people feel about interacting with workers? How would you like to respond if there is aggression from workers? Are there any ways you tend to react? How would you like to support each other afterwards if there are experiences of aggression?
- What tactics are people interested in and comfortable with participating in? Such as linking arms, sitting down, using other equipment?
- How would you want to respond if the police give a move on order?
- Are there other action tactics you would consider if there is an opportunity?
- How long are you willing to stay there? Under what conditions or situations would you want to leave?
- Will you debrief together afterwards?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNITY PICKETS IN THE ILLAWARRA

To provide some further context for what community pickets are, how they have been used in militant struggle, and why they remain an important tactic, here are some examples of community pickets in various struggles in the Illawarra.

M1 Carnival Against Capital: Community Picket of Port Kembla Copper (2000)

The M1 community picket of PKC was part of a string of global actions against capitalism. M1 2000 was a Global Day of Action billed as a Carnival Against Capital (see enRAged issues 1 and 2 here). This was the period of the alter-globalisation movement, which saw widespread global struggles linked together in various ways, which tended to target major meetings of global capital. The M1 picket brought Illawarra struggle against PKC into relation with the global revolt against capitalist rule.

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The PKC picket took place on May Day, organised through a subcommittee of the Wollongong May Day Committee. While the carnival against capital at PKC was organised through the M1 subcommittee, importantly the picket involved a range of groups, organisations and members of the Port Kembla and Wollongong community. Around 100 people participated in the picket, initially shutting down 2 of the 3 entrances to the site, before a group of people moved to shut down the third and final entrance. The last move effectively shut all entry and exit to the site, which in turn generated the condition that provoked arrests on the day.

At its strongest, the picket was decentralised and non-hierarchical, evidenced by the meetings held on the picket lines themselves about tactics, responses to police and so on. Militant pickets were formed to block truck access to the site and 9 arrests were made on the day. The PKC picket is a good example of a participatory, democratically structured and effective community picket.

As the picket continued, Joy Mining issued a Supreme Court injunction against the unions, "preventing them from blockading the site." In this situation the unions could not legally prevent the movement of jobs and machinery off site. However, despite the fact that the unions were unable legally to confront Joy Mining directly, due to the injunction, the participation of community members helped keep the struggle going, and to increase its militancy, through community pickets.

Joy Mining: Pickets and Site Occupations (2000)

The Joy Mining Machinery dispute illustrates the relationship between seemingly local struggles, and the operations of global capital. Unlike the PKC struggle, however, this campaign was based around immediate work conditions for a specific section of the class, and in support of workers employed in fossil industries. In this sense, the Joy dispute and community support is an interesting example of contradiction and solidarity in the planetary factory. Through a process of downsizing, casualisation and erosion of pay and conditions, Joy Mining sought to scrap the enterprise agreement and introduce 4 separate agreements. This was rejected by the union and workers, and Joy Mining threatened to close the site, issuing lockout notices, which lead to the pickets. The Joy Mining dispute lasted for 205 days of the year 2000, beginning in March, and ending in October. During that time there was a 24-hour picket at the Moss Vale Joy plant, the initial site of the conflict, and pickets were established in Coniston and Unanderra, as the struggle broadened. The campaign also received international attention, and international solidarity actions.

The company's production was moved off site beginning in late March and in response the picket formed. On April 14, 2000, the Joy workers were issued with the first of two lockout notices. The lockout was for three months, but the workers remained on the picket.

Community pickets have been a tactic utilised by unions in order to defy laws prohibiting the organisation of pickets and were powerfully and successfully used in the MUA dispute in 1998. In the Joy dispute, 'concerned citizen committees' were formed to participate in the pickets.

Numerous people participated through the 'committees', including students and other community members. Due to the lack of legal restrictions on the 'committees', these participants were able to act in a more direct manner at the site of the struggle. Once again, this involved direct action and blockading the site to prevent its operations. As the conflict continued, and after Joy Mining moved some of its operations off site to Coniston, actions were held at these other sites in Coniston and Unanderra.

This was a different situation to the straight up community picket of M1 and SRVM. Joy Mining was ostensibly a trade union picket, but due to legal injunctions unions were prevented from running the pickets. This led to an interesting situation where the formal union campaign and leadership was only one part of the story, as the pickets were essentially run by those who were on the picket lines (see enRAged: the journal of Revolutionary Action issue 2 for analysis and discussion of this). These were community pickets in support of the workers struggle, but practically organised and run by the picketers themselves, not the union leadership. This was an interesting political space facilitating an experimentation with participatory organisation on the pickets themselves for the picketers. In total, pickets were held in Moss Vale, Coniston (where scab labour was operating), and at the site in Unanderra.

Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy (SPATE)-Kuradji, Sandon Point Community Picket and Blockades 2002

In 2000 Stockland Constructors Pty Ltd (Stockland), "submitted development applications to Wollongong Council for stages 1-6" of its 20-stage, 1200 house, residential plan for the Sandon Point area. Sandon Point is located between Bulli and Thirroul. Aboriginal connection to the area goes back to time immemorial, and the Stocklands development plan sat atop a known sacred Aboriginal Burial site. In 1998, remains of a 6000-year-old Kuradji were exposed in the beach at Sandon Point. Remains had also been located in the area in the 1950s and 1970s, and in the era of the colony the area has been known as an Aboriginal burial ground since at least 1887 (Organ; Salter). The area was also one of the last green corridors connecting the escarpment to the ocean and was a significant wetland ecology inhabited by unique and endangered species.

In December 2000, a Sacred Fire was brought to the Kuradji site from the long-established Tent Embassy in Canberra, which marked the establishment of The Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy (SPATE) and the beginning of a long-term campaign and struggle to prevent the Stocklands development. SPATE was a permanently occupied place that was the centre of the struggle against the development.

In early 2000, a "senior lore man of the Yuin Nation, declared 'no houses' be built at Sandon Point and renamed the area Kuradji (McInerny 2001)." And "in early 2001 the Illawarra Aboriginal Land Council declared the area a site of state significance." SPATE had widespread support, but it also faced harsh opposition, vandalism and arson attacks on multiple occasions.

Up the hill from SPATE, on another section of the development site, a 24-hour community picket was established. The community picket was formed a few months after SPATE, on March 3rd 2001. As Salter notes, "following a direct request, SPATE presented a letter to the NIRAG (Northern Illawarra Residents Action Group) detailing the granting of permission 'to come onto country to establish and staff a 24 hour-a-day Peaceful Protest Camp'. The Community Picket, as it became known, remained onsite until the evening of 23 February 2006, when the structure was destroyed by arson."

A wide range of interests and issues were at play in the opposition to the development. And a wide array of tactics and strategies were used. During 2002 there were two major direct actions at the Sandon Point development site. The first became known as the 'Valentines Day Blockade'. The Valentine's Day Blockade was a three-day blockade of the site, as Stockland attempted to move heavy earth moving machinery onto the site, between the 11th and 14th of February 2002. After the development proposal was granted, Stockland attempted to bring in the first of its machinery for the construction. The blockade involved over 200 picketers, physically using their bodies to prevent the entry of the machinery. On the 14th the police began a "massive operation" to get through the blockade. Seventy people were arrested on the day, as Stockland began moving machinery on to the site. However, the picket stalled the progress of the development and the company then had to stop work as a court injunction won by SPATE prevented the commencement of development.

The second major direct action at Sandon Point occurred just three months later, in May 2002. As earth works began, a broad based and militant action occurred over two days. As Southall (enRAged: the journal of Revolutionary Action issue 5) reported at the time, 'on Monday May 20 about 150 people broke through the fence at Sandon Point. The contractors and their equipment withdrew to a fenced inner compound.' The fence of the inner compound was then pulled down, and then the entire perimeter fence was pulled down. 2 days later, another mobilisation occurred, which pulled down the fences around the site, sabotaged the building surveyance plans, and involved a 'lock-on' to machinery. Sixteen people were arrested over those two days.

The campaign against the Stockland development, and the Valentine's Day Blockade and the May actions, within this campaign were significant in demonstrating how the practical experience of struggle and militancy helped to forge common experiences, solidarity, and commitment across different interests, and in solidarity with SPATE.

Stop Russell Vale Mine Community Pickets 2021-2023

The close of 2021 saw a return of community pickets to oppose coal mine expansions in the Illawarra region, in particular at the Russell Vale Colliery. One group, Stop Russell Vale Mine (SRVM) played a important part in organising community pickets at the gates of the mine. SRVM formed out of the Protect Our Water Alliance (POWA), a group doing excellent work to stop all mining in the Sydney-Illawarra water catchment via a range of organisational methods. POWA continues to do important organising that involves movement building, critical research and street protest (another group formed out of POWA to focus specifically on two legal interventions). SRVM was inspired by these efforts to form a separate group, with a specific focus on direct action at Russell Vale Mine.

The campaign to Stop Russell Vale Mine saw a number of direct actions over the course of 2021-2023, involving several mass community pickets, a lock on at the gates to block entry, and during covid restrictions a range of small-scale actions at the mine gates. For example, on March 25th, 2022, Russell Vale Colliery was picketed by the Illawarra climate movement. As part of the Global Climate Strike, 50-80 community members, including residents from Russell Vale, ex-coal workers, and many others from the Illawarra and elsewhere picketed the entrances to the mine.

For around 3 hours in pouring rain, the main mine entrance was blocked, along with the secondary mine entrance after it had been opened as an alternative entry route. The picket on March 25th, 2022 was largely successful, evident in the fact that the pickets held for a number of hours in the pouring rain. Initially picketing only one entrance, when it became apparent that a second entrance to the mine had been opened, the picket organised itself to split in two groups and block both entrances. The pickets discussed and decided on how to block the entrances, when the question of whether workers could enter the site while still blocking trucks, it was decided to block entry and exit from the mine. When the police approached one of the picket lines, discussion and decisions were held as to how to respond, to what extent to hold the picket, and who was arrestable.

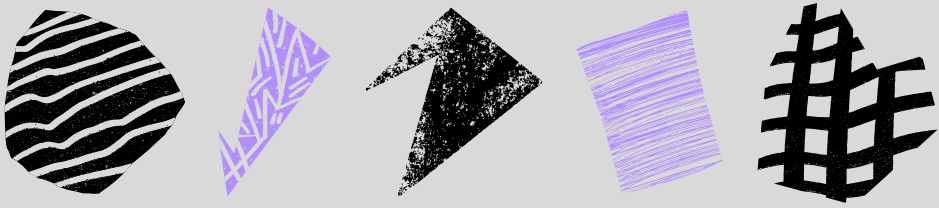
The campaign against Russell Vale Mine continued over 2022, and there was another mass community picket in April of 2023. Again, the community came out to picket the gates of the mine, successfully blocking entrances. The Russell Vale mine has since gone into 'care and maintenance' and is out of operation for the foreseeable future.

CONCLUSION

We hope this zine has been a useful recap of some of the things we have thought about and talked about as we planned the Bisalloy Pickets in 2023 on Dharawal Country.

Our pickets couldn't exist without the many radical actions that has taken place on this Country. They are the latest installment in a long tradition of militant, democratic, mass action.

We hope that this zine, and the pickets themselves, continue to support and engender these tendencies.

FURTHER READING

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